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AMERICA,

VIEWED

Physically, Politically, Religiously.

A THANKSGIVING DISCOURSE.

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VIEWED

PHYSICALLY, POLITICALLY, RELIGIOUSLY.

A DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED ON

THANKSGIVING DAY, NOVEMBER 24, 1864.

BY

D. DUBOIS SAHLER,

PASTOR OF THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, SHEFFIELD, MASS.



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PHYSICALLY, POLITICALLY, RELIGIOUSLY.

“He hath not dealt so with any nation.”—PSALM 147 : 20.

THIS was not the language of ignorance. The early empires were well known.

There they were:—Nineveh, the first of nations, with the world as her domain; and Babylon, perpetually associated with all that is resplendent in courts and kingdoms; Media, holding monarchs as slaves in her palaces; and Persia, unable to expend her treasure, with the people of many realms and languages subject to her sway.

Upon an elevation, higher than these empires, stood Israel, as the favorite of Heaven.

Nor was it in unhallowed boasting that this song of thanksgiving was sung. Human pride was lost in genuine gratitude of the heart. Indeed, inherent greatness in Israel, as a people, was not in any proportion to the extraordinary providences attending them.

Israel was fostered, guided, inspired, as were

none of the ancient empires. Great and holy men, such as they did not possess, were her counselors and leaders. A national inheritance was waiting centuries for her possession. Miraculous experiences formed her history, such as Nineveh, Persia, and Babylon had never known.

Her historical record is too familiar to require a rehearsal. In our day it is a constant instructor of the mind and an inspirer of the imagination. Comparing it with that of the other governments of the earth, it was truly declared: "He hath not dealt so with any nation."

The present is a repetition of the past. We believe there are to be observed divine dealings, and manifestations, and what may almost be called miracles in these later days—in our own times, and in the history of our own country. There are things connected with our national history worthy of our heartfelt and grateful remembrance.

The hymn of thanksgiving which echoed in the East may resound in the West. The music of Jordan and Siloam's rill is answered by the chorus of the Hudson, the Mississippi, and ever-praising Niagara.

I. The position assigned to our country is worthy of notice. We are planted away from the world, as it were, and yet in the midst of it. On the East we look toward Europe. The power of our example is felt across the Atlantic. Monarchy

is there crumbling to decay. The boasted mistress of the seas trembles at the unfriendliness of a neighboring dynasty. We rest in comparative safety amid the efforts of thrones after more extended empire. The ocean banishes from us the idea of monarchical succession and of the divine right of kings to do as they please.

Upon our Western borders, instead of one Atlantic we have three. There the Pacific rolls for ten thousand miles its silver tides. Beyond, lie those mysteries of human existence, the nations of Asia. It is well that their crowded and suffocating millions are not at our doors. The characteristics of these nations are insatiable avarice and unutterable atheism. Their proximity would be the omen of a moral and physical struggle of portentous magnitude and duration. Our virtue and our patriotism might not save us from terrible disaster or destruction. The widest expanse of water on the earth is made to separate between us and them. To it has been given the significant, and it is hoped prophetic name of the Pacific—that is,—Peace.

No situation could be more admirable than ours for attaining a noble destiny. In our weakness it was our strength, in our strength it vastly augments our power. We may shed upon the world the light of truth, and are preserved from evil influences.

We may now glance at the land itself.

In the North, lies a chain of lakes or inland seas. They claim, after their kind, preëminence in beauty and extent. Our coasts present inviting harbors to the mariner. The Hudson, with an easy grace, carries away the crown for attractiveness from other rivers. The Mississippi, with its tributaries, takes no second place in varied and enchanting scenery, in vast regions drained, and irrigated, and in usefulness to man. In the center and heart of our country are found the almost unlimited prairies. We see them in the flowery bloom of spring, and in the green and gold of their summer attire. Once beheld, they can never be forgotten. They remain in the mind life's unfading dream of beauty. From east to west, ten thousand valleys, springs, and rivulets reflect the smiles of Heaven. Mountain chains traverse the country and vary the landscape. Lofty peaks, some of them perpetually white with the snows of ages, stand as reverend monitors, pointing silently to the Infinity of power.

In America, labor receives its richest reward. This remark is applicable to every department of enterprise. The Western soil is unrivaled in fertility, unless you exchange a temperate clime for the heat and miasma of the tropics. Providential safeguards against famine exist, in variety and extent of territory, and in the facility of communication. Europe is looking to our prairies to give bread to her people. For many years, the chief supply of cotton has been obtained from this coun-

try. The arts and sciences have been liberally encouraged. Our manufactures compete with those of the world. The vegetable and mineral kingdoms in almost all their productions have here found a home. Subterranean rivers of oil pour forth their streams of light to human habitations all over the earth. Mountains of gold and mountains of silver are drawing millions to the West to balance the millions of the East. Civilization, with bewildering rapidity, is laying the foundation of free empires in solitudes untrodden but by the foot of the savage.

Our land is probably the healthiest region on the globe. Great exposure is incident to the settlement of new countries. Fortune and fame are here pursued with absorbing anxiety. Frequent and widespread financial disasters occur. There is a constant strain upon the physical and mental power of the nation. Americans, nevertheless, live longer than any other people. A larger number reaches the age of a century than in other most favored and civilized portions of the earth.

Terrible plagues, which appear to have their natural abode in the Old World, come upon us with comparative lightness. Something may be attributed to the resolute buoyancy of the people. This quality led them to forsake their native lands, hoping for a better home on a distant shore. This spirit, it may be, shakes off many diseases.

The national enthusiasm, or, if you please, restlessness, secures necessary recreation and variety. It is doubtful whether Americans, as a people, live too fast. Instances of extremes, in one way or other, are always to be expected. Great activity and energy, however, are desirable characteristics in nations. Our endeavor should be to have these forces properly directed.

II. We are now advancing to the secret of the foregoing providences. Why is there given to this nation a position at once central and remote? Why is the land unsurpassed in beauty, fertility and health?

The older portions of the world were, in important respects, failures. Small and slow advances had been made in the love of truth and virtue. May we not think it was, therefore, said on high: Let the experiment be again permitted and ordered of forming a nation, wherein dwelleth righteousness? Let a people be trained for God and placed as the almoner of blessings to the world. A new Eden was, therefore, chosen, and a new family was created among the nations.

This family was not new in the blood which ran in its veins. It was new in the political and religious ideas which were its life. Nor were these ideas and principles themselves new. It was the manner of their expression. It was the first national declaration that a man was a man. A nation decreed

that no king or petty despot should place the foot of his might upon any guiltless brother man. It ordered that in the great essentials of manhood his lowly brother should be held as his equal. Instead of pushing him lower, he should encourage him to rise toward the perfection of his nature.

This, indeed, was an old idea. It had been whispered by individuals from time immemorial. It was believed to be an article of the divine constitution which the world should adopt. This, however, was the first time a nation had undertaken to declare and profess it.

To maintain this principle the Fathers of America pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. Their idea was Liberty, and Union for the sake of Liberty. In the first place, their national liberty among the adverse governments of the earth, and then their individual liberty as citizens of the nation.

Individual liberty, which is so happily poised, guarded, and cheered in our national politics, is the distinctive mark and strength of the Anglo-Saxon and allied races.

In the dispersion of the human family they took it from their home in Asia. They did not lose it in their migrations over the plains of Russia. It became more and more a part of their nature in the forests of Germany. They still inherited

and claimed it along the shores of the Baltic and in the island of Britain.

Christianity breathed a heavenly life into this principle. It guided it to its ultimate and true expression. Thus inspired, we believe this principle will be mighty in disenthraling and elevating races which have been sinking under despotism. It will give them life, quicken their sloth, make them rise to the true standard of manhood.

The discovery has been made of using individual liberty as a power of national safety and development. Let a nation be found with faith enough in God and in the right. Let the speech and the ballot of the people be free, and, in time, they will arrive at the highest possible national perfection. The doctrine to which we are committed before heaven and the nations of the earth is *Vox populi, vox Dei*. The voice of the people is the voice of God—not immediately and at all times, but ultimately.

They who advocate principles of national equity or improvement may have a hard contest. Let them not despond, however. Free speech, free ballot, the mind, and the conscience of the people are theirs. If they persevere, ere long the shout of victory will be heard.

The state invests citizens with the right of seeking for the popular adoption of any measure, even to the change of the fundamental law. If what is proposed is just and good, it will eventually tri-

umph over the most formidable opposition. Children will then build a monument, praising the virtues of those whom their fathers derided. Be it false in principle or practically useless—though it may be galvanized into seeming life for an hour—it will and should perish.

This, then, is the soul of the nation, this is its political life and strength—Liberty; inspired, chastened, exalted by Christianity. Its influence was felt to the remotest extremities of the national system.

We must not omit to notice here the evil in the body politic. While yet under a foreign yoke, a system with which we have become painfully familiar was entailed upon the people. An uncivilized portion of the human family was imported from a distant continent and enslaved. Not without revulsion and protestation, however. From parts of the sunny South came a voice, strong and decided, declaring that slavery should never be tolerated among them. May the virtue of the fathers atone in our eyes for the grievous errors of their children!

The Constitution was formed, declaring freedom, yet recognizing slavery as an institution, to be protected within certain limits and in certain ways. The people enjoyed and professed the fairest principles of liberty. At the same time they were allied to a gross system of oppression and wrong. In strange association, American freedom was con-

joined with American slavery. The antagonism was absolute and irreconcilable. Could the two be perpetuated together? Impossible. The idea of the Anglo-Saxon and sister races, that of individual liberty, forbid. The elevating and merciful spirit of the Christian religion forbid. The institutions, the genius, and spirit of the nation springing from these germs of political and religious life, forbid. We may ask the historian, or the student of human nature, if it is strange, in view of these things, that our country has fallen into its present perils? Could there be peace with these elements in the nation? As well might you expect to place an iceberg in the glowing crater of Vesuvius, and not produce commotion.

The portents were not wanting. Murmurings were heard; flying clouds were seen in the national horizon. Patriots beheld, and looked upon one another. Some said, these clouds will pass away; this trembling will subside, and be succeeded by a calm; fears arise from illusions of the mind—all is well.

Again, deeper rumblings of passion shook the continent. A host of orators arose, and each one, in his own way, showed how to allay the commotion. Human wisdom exhausted its resources. Yet more profound and violent was the rolling tide of national feeling.

The immortal Clay and Webster, who spake and nations heard, saw the time approaching. What

would be the final issue they could not discover. They feared the temple of American nationality would be razed to its foundations, and not one fair stone left upon another. In imagination, they saw the eagle of American liberty rise in the heavens, and, forsaking forever the land of promise, wend its uncertain flight to distant climes and ages of the world. As they peered into the unknown years, they prayed that the fearful day might not dawn upon their eyes. Their petition was answered. They were removed from witnessing the disaster, their eloquence and statesmanship could not avert.

Now there came a sound from the Southern Atlantic coasts—from the embattled walls of Sumter. Its echoes spread over the savannahs of the South, through the valleys and across the prairies of the North. For a moment the millions held their breath. Clearly, distinctly, the momentous issue was presented. In one day it was understood and accepted—*A nation's ruin or regeneration.*

Let it not be said that Christian republics foster selfishness and not patriotism. The life-struggle of our people should silence forever the insinuation of malignant and decrepid monarchy.

Through divine mercy, the faith and virtue of the people has saved the country from destruction. The perilous crisis of the danger is, we believe, nearly overridden. Like tempest-tost mariners, that have doubled Cape Horn, we see sufficient

light before us to hope that we shall soon sail in the mild waters of the boundless Pacific.

Perchance, it could not have been otherwise. In a condition of affairs anomalous as that which has marked American history, the wisest men may have wisely differed. May it not be said that the difficulty was not incalculably more in the men than in the peculiar circumstances of the period in which they lived?

We are here reminded we can not be mere spectators of this national drama. We are actors in these scenes. There are things for us to determine and to do. Present duty demands our attention. Let us attempt to follow its direction.

As a nation, we are evidently entering upon a new era. The time has, therefore, come when those who have been opposites as to governmental policy should be reconciled, and mutually forgive. Let, therefore, the past be past. Let the bitterness, the partisanship, and the sectional feeling which have arisen sink forever in the depth of generous forgetfulness.

First, I call for forgiveness in respect to those who have favored emancipation policies. We may view them as agreeing upon the evil of slavery, and in some form of opposition. However bitter or radical any of them may have been, who will say there was no occasion? When the period comes, of the deliverance of mankind from thralldom of soul and body, will not men justify them

for earnestly pressing their principles? That period we believe is steadily approaching. In a few years it will be the boast of Americans that no slave can land upon our shores without being thenceforth forever free. Whatever these men may have wrongly done, we crave for them forgiveness. Alas! there was a fearful, bitter occasion.

Again we plead for the pardon of those who have ranged themselves against the advocates of freedom. We know the view they have been led to entertain of our affairs.

The nation's faith was pledged in a certain way in regard to slavery. The minds of multitudes seized upon this fact. They were easily convinced that emancipation tendencies were against the spirit of national pledges. The idea of liberty was fought as if it was a demon.

The influence of slavery on those to whom it came as an inheritance, is to be remembered. It came from their fathers an institution of the world, and they supposed it was an institution of God. They found it existing in all ages, and contemporaneously with them in other portions of the world. The divine regulation of its evils, they were persuaded was intended to give it the sanction of Heaven. Moreover, they regarded it as a matter to be adjusted solely by the States by whom it was adopted. Every address favorable to liberty, from persons in the free States, was resented as an incursion upon their rights.

It was claimed to be an impossibility to remove the system, extended and fixed as it was. There was an irrepressible revulsion from the great social changes and pecuniary loss, it was thought emancipation would bring.

Hereafter, these difficulties will doubtlessly be appreciated. Men in the future will look leniently on many who are now condemned. Let us forestall their judgment. Let us not reprobate altogether those who have felt constrained to oppose the views of liberty which have gained control. Nay, rather let them be forgiven.

We wish to be included in the general amnesty of the heart those who, in the mighty ferment of our people, were apparently unmoved. Their course was taken not because the moral and political aspects of the question were not appreciated. Their decision was made after long and careful consideration. If they erred, it was not for want of thought. "We may be reproached," said they, "for not taking our position as men in a great moral conflict. We will bear the burden. We will lighten it by this reflection. We can not be charged with the stirring up of passion which only blood could satisfy. Our part shall be to allay the frenzy of the hour. When the great contest comes, and after it has passed into history, it will not be said that we added to the length or severity of the strife."

And now we make a final plea. The existence

of a divine principle in our hearts will now be tested. We speak for those who passed the bounds of legal disputation, who in an hour of disappointment plunged into revolution. The Government is restoring them from the abyss into which they would draw themselves and their country. As this is being accomplished, let us imitate the divine magnanimity. Let us welcome them, with our reproaches forever buried, back again to their home, to the sisterhood of States. We have tasted earthly bitterness in our discipline. May we hasten to enjoy the sweetness of celestial nectar — that the bitterness may die.

“To err is human, to forgive divine.”

We have been taught the truth of the former part of this apothegm in a way we can not forget. May we so practice the virtue commended, that the world will remember it forever.

Let the opening of a new era be thus celebrated. Then as a people honored and blessed, we may rise to the more perfect realization of

“A liberty unsung
By poets, by senators unpraised.”

III. We are thus introduced to the noblest and most interesting phase of American life. It is no longer esteemed a cant to refer to the intervention of the supernatural and divine as an important element in the affairs of men. Nor need one hesi-

tate to assert that America is remarkably favored in this respect. A peculiar necessity exists for this influence. In religion men are free. There is no obstruction between the soul and God. One feeling and asserting with others this freedom should be impressed with divine ideas. He should have a sense of his immediate accountability to the infinitely Wise and Good. The motives arising from his immortal existence should constantly affect his mind. The distinguishing mercy of heaven is herein reflected. This land is not only most thoroughly permeated with the true principle of civil liberty. It is also most highly blessed with the inspirations of religion.

The souls of men are guided and taught from on high. Wherever divine truth is known, and there is found a circle of praying hearts, the Holy Spirit draws those of every age and condition to the path of "glory and virtue." Vast and increasing multitudes walk forth daily with God as their Father, Jesus as their Saviour and Friend, and heaven as their home.

Christians from abroad see and rejoice in the goodly religion of America, its simplicity, its devotion, its generosity. We listen to their words with some surprise, since here is no constraint. All is natural — the soul being simply and alone influenced by divine motives. Faith seems natural since we are not driven to it, but attracted toward it by God himself. Freedom of religion has a posi-

tive power and hold upon the people. We have little fear of false hierarchal systems. The priestly anathema in other lands is an instantaneous blight to all that is dear in life. It has no terror on this side of the Atlantic. A system countenancing such an act soon falls to decay. It may not sink beneath the power of denunciation. It will be as with the icy castles of the queen of Russia, which are built in winter, and melt away in spring. Those systems which are erected in the freezing, cheerless winter of error, will sink from view in the genial sunlight and atmosphere of truth.

America is blessed with a ministry in the main apostolic in spirit and doctrine, a church with little superstition, with clearness in conviction of truth, with active and growing benevolence.

Our people love their churches. They do not fear them as symbols of terror. Their churches are their homes, their feasting-places, the gate of heaven to their souls.

A distinctive feature of American life is the Sabbath. This sacred institution is better understood here than in any other portion of the world. In Asia and Africa, it is unknown. In Europe, with limited exception, it is a day of tiresome formalism, with a sequel of worldly amusement, without any rest for soul or body.

In America, we have a Sabbath. Its morning's dawn is a holy calm. Through all our States, in

our rural regions, in our villages, towns, and cities, the music of thousands of chiming bells calls a nation to their temple-gates. Thronging multitudes pour forth from the abodes of wealth and from cottage homes. They meet around their altars and listen to the word of life.

On this their day, as stars of holy light, with messages of truth, with unfoldings of spiritual and eternal things, with appeals to the conscience and the heart, with winnings to the love, and warnings of the wrath, stand the ministers of God, the ambassadors of heaven.

Another multitude, with shining faces and beaming eyes, in the elasticity and joy of childhood's day, gathers in many earnest circles, and ponders the teachings of Him who spake on earth as man has never spoken.

From these great assemblages, from all these swelling hearts, rise the songs and prayers of the spirit into the ear of God. The Father's blessing descends. He whispers of hope to the hearts of his children. Sorrow is driven from their eyes. They go forth strengthened against temptations, prepared for life's duty, ready to receive and sweeten the joys of earth.

The birthright which the American claims is the Bible. He demands it as his own, as a free man on the footstool of God. No pretended prerogative, human or divine, can take it from him. Its heavenly pages will be his instruction. He

will walk with it through the world, and by it approve or condemn. Its truth is the rest of his soul. He will not part with it until, with his last breath, he deposits it as his guide upon the threshold of heaven. We trust this ideal has abounding examples.

Under the divine hand, the varied elements of humanity are here assimilated, and, as it were, a new man made. This new world has produced, we believe, a purer, nobler, freer man than can be found anywhere else on the earth.

The Almighty hand has brought us to this princely land. It has blessed us here, causing many clouds to pass, and giving us brightness afterward. As to the future, our prayer and faith unite. That Hand will still be with us, fulfilling our ardent hopes, cementing our Union, making us a virtuous, free, and happy people, whose God is the LORD.

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